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ABSTRACT

For one Sansei (third-generation Japanese American) university student who had been brought up by her Japanese grandparents, questions of who she was and how much upbringing and personal experiences had molded her were with her constantly. She questioned how much of her grandfather's and her mother's high expectations had to do with her lack of self-esteem. She also asked herself whether the continually stressed importance of school had given her an unreasonable prejudice against education. Assignments in a university class in autobiographical/biographical writing led to the development of an awareness of self and of the uniqueness of her American heritage. Through writing and sharing stories with others in the class, all the students were able to move their individual visions both inward and outward. Excerpts from a story about grandfather and the Japanese internment in Manzanar show how this process came about for the Japanese American student. Through her writing, used as a survival tool, she began to recognize where her own behaviors were coming from, and knew that the cycle would have to stop with her. She finally understood the psychological and emotional damage the internment had had on her family. At the end of the writing course, the Japanese American student felt that she could fit into the diverse American culture with a better understanding and sense of true belonging. (NKA)

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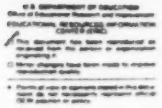

ED 386 746

WRITING TO TERMS WITH MY JAPANESE AMERICAN HERITAGE

--by Deborah C. Ahn

Like some people of my generation, I have wondered about my heritage. Many people began to question and search after the viewing of Alex Haley's Roots in the late 1970s. However, although I was born and, for the most part, raised in this country, I have always been very aware of my Japanese heritage since I was a small child. Being brought up by Japanese grandparents, the Japanese philosophy was heavily instilled into me daily. The actual questioning, however, began when I began to take notice of my differences from the rest of my American friends. Why was I not able to do the things my other friends were allowed. As far as he was concerned, "Japanese just do not do those kinds of things."

> My memories of Grandpa are mixed: most are filled with unhappiness and dismay, but some are relatively contented. Concurrently however, are feelings of compassion, understanding and empathy towards him. I am not the only one in the family who feels this way, but I believe I am the only one who openly admits the pain without always making excuses for his behavior.
>
> A difficult man to get along with, Grandpa was a man who was very private and unsociable. He knew what he liked and didn't like, approved of and didn't approve of. The people close to him were always waiting to see what his mood was for the day. If we said hi, would he reciprocate with a hi, a grunt, or just silence? One never knew. I tried not to take it personally, but in many cases I did. (Chapter 2, "People: Gramps")

As I grew older, I also noticed that not only was I different from my American friends, but I was also different from the rest of my family. I did not fully belong to either one...almost a chasm in between. If I hadn't felt so "American," the conflict would not have been so confusing. I would have, like many **Sansei** (third-generation Japanese) and other ethnic third generation children, rebelled and made a stand by refusing to think Japanese, to eat Japanese, to speak Japanese, to do Japanese,...to be Japanese! And so I began to question how I fit into the scheme of things. I never seemed to fit right with my mother. I definitely did not fit right with my grandfather. As I was only half Japanese and half Native American and Spanish, I looked different from my cousins, aunts, and uncles. Grandma was the only one with whom I felt a real connection.

> "Deborah, I must have brought the wrong kid home from the hospital," my mother often said to me.
>
> I suppose there have been incidents when people have taken the wrong kid home from the hospital. As different as I do look from the rest of my family, I really wondered if in fact she mistakenly brought the wrong kid home from the hospital. The rest of my family had light skin. I had dark. The rest of my family had small slanted eyes. Mine were large and round. The rest of my family was short and on the slim side. I was tall and chunky. Above all, the rest of my family seemed highly intelligent. I continually

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did stupid things. It was during these times that I was told by my mother that she must have brought the wrong kid home from the hospital.

The question of my real parents began to plague my imagination (although years later I was confident that she was in fact my real mother). I began to playact in my mind that one day my real mother, a strange woman, was going to come into our lives and reclaim me. Every once in a while however, when I did these so called stupid things, my mother would slip up and tell me, "Just like your old man. You didn't get that from me." Ah hah! I really was her daughter. I just had a stupid father. (Chapter 5, "Beginnings: Am I Really Hers?")

As an adult, I have tried to make sense of it all. Questions of who I was and how much of my upbringing and personal experiences molded me were with me constantly. I wondered how much of the continually stressed importance of school had given me an unreasonable prejudice against education. I questioned how much of my grandfather and mother's excessively high expectations had to do with my lack of self-esteem. I asked myself, how much of my unreasonable behavior toward my own children is directly influenced by my grandfather and mother's behavior toward me.

You are only seven years old right now and I believe, because you are such a sensitive child, you understand more than most your age. I am afraid, however, that what is happening between you and Mommy right now is beyond your ability to understand at the moment. I only hope that in time you will come to understand me and the reasons Mommy is the way she is. I think the only way you can understand me is to know what happened to me as a child. In fact, it is only recently that I have begun to understand my behavior myself.

You see, you and Mommy, and I and my mother are sharing some similarities. When I was growing up, my mother was also very busy with school and work. She was lucky as my grandparents were able to help her out by taking care of me. I hardly saw my mother, but when I did, it was mostly during late night scoldings...at least that is what I remember. Most of my memories of her were cancelled vacations or lunches because "something came up." My mother was very hard on herself and hard on me. She expected herself to be the best and expected me to be the best. She pushed me in all that I did: piano, dance, but especially school. Her attitude was that Cs were only for average people, Bs were not much better as it only proved that if I had worked just a little bit harder I could have received an A. I remember being grounded for several months because of a C on my report card. This often meant groundings through more than one grading period. She often told me she must have brought the wrong child home from the hospital. (Chapter 6, "Letters: Dearest Jonathan")

The questioning went on for years and I had no idea how to answer them. They all floated above me in a senseless direction, like unplaced puzzle pieces, never landing or staying in one place

The following year, although there were classes in between, a geography assignment about one's hometown led me to write "Skid Row." It forced me to use my memory to write about another painful, yet amazingly revealing time of my life and character and the importance of place in my recognition of self. This story was eventually published in the university's literary magazine, where several people read my story with interest. I mentioned briefly in the story, the time in which my family spent the early 1940's during World War II in the Manzanar internment camp, in Owens Valley, California. A Japanese student, who by the way was taking the very class which I took upon coming back to school, was given an assignment to write about the internment camps. She read my story and wanted to interview me. At this time, I also wrote my first poem which was published the same year titled "Mostly On My Mind." Both the poem about my educational environment and the story about my home were food enough for her to question me in such a way that I began to fit some of those floating puzzle pieces of questions together. Based on her questions, I realized the connection between my problems and my life situations to World War II when Japanese Americans were interned. More about this in a moment...

At this same time, I was taking the writing class taught by Priscilla Kelly, Autobiographical/Biographical Writing. Through her writing assignments of **Interview**, **Letter**, **Beginning**, **Event**, **Place**, **People**, **Perspective**, and **Book Review**, I began to develop an awareness of self to an awareness of my unique part of the American heritage.

> Home is not a word I can use to describe one place. Nor is it a word to describe one feeling. I have lived in too many places to describe such a solitary idea. In a past life, I would have been a content nomadic hunter and gatherer. An almost gypsy quality, I feel the need to continually move on.
>
> From my first birthday to age nine, I lived on Larimer Street, better known as "Skid Row," in Denver, Colorado. Denver ranks as one of the largest American cities; colorful ethnic diversity is provided by Mexicans as the largest group, followed by Blacks, other Hispanics, Jews, Whites, and almost equal numbers of Native American Indians and Japanese. While many of the physical aspects are vague to me, the experiences are quite vivid. My "home" comprised only a five-block area. Skid Row ran from east to west for approximately two miles, but my world was only three blocks of the street. I lived right in the middle of it all. I recall a landscape of only concrete and brick; no trees, plants, flowers or shrubs ever adorned the streets.
>
> The area is quite sharply defined, consisting of mostly bars, motels, Mexican restaurants and two grocery stores, Johnny's Market and its competition, "S & K Food Market," my grandparents' store....
>
> Always, there was something new and exciting on Larimer Street. My daily contacts were cops, drug dealers, and prostitutes. However, my best buddies were the drunks. I even scolded a policeman for roughing my friend, Charlie, who had passed out on the sidewalk. After all, he just

wanted to sleep it off. I also remember running out onto four-lane Larimer Street to stop the traffic as another of my buddies passed out right in the middle of the street. Cars came to a screeching halt.

Noise was prevalent around my home. Screams, brawls, gunshots were all part of life there. An Indian woman who lived above us in the motel which Grandma and Grandpa owned cried and screamed daily. I could hear her man beating her, knocking furniture around, and then silence after a bang. I guess she couldn't take it anymore--she shot and killed him. Guns were always around me, and to this day I will have nothing to do with them. At age six, I woke up one morning to the sight of a revolver directly in front of me on the dresser. Curious as any child, I got out of bed, picked it up and immediately felt the cold heaviness. The feeling was frightening and I put it right back. Looking back, I suppose I could have been another statistic had I played with it or looked down the barrel and accidentally pulled the trigger.

Weeks later, the gun was missing. The same gun was the one used to kill my uncle on November 22, 1963. He was shot and killed the same way and day as President John F. Kennedy. My uncle had overheard a conversation upstairs in the motel about a drug deal; he came downstairs and told my mother. Unbeknownst to him, Louie, the butcher in our store, was also involved in the same drug deal; he overheard my mother and uncle talking. Louie was in some way connected to the Mexican Mafia and, because of his unwitting information, they eliminated my uncle. Because my mother also knew about the drug deal, they told her to keep quiet or the same thing would happen to her only child, me. She never said a word.

I often think back on Larimer Street and wonder what effect it had on my life. I was lucky not to be pulled into a variety of illegal activities by the people who surrounded my life. The one person who did make a large impact on my present life was a woman named Stella. After dark, Stella would walk up and down Larimer Street, but mostly stood still in front of the bar next door. To me, she was absolutely beautiful: tall and slender and seeming to love everyone...So, what is the impact of this woman on my life today? Not long ago, I was asked why I had so many pairs of red shoes. You see, Stella always wore red shoes. (Chapter 3, "Places: Skid Row")

I realized I had a multi-faceted life, with an interesting family background, and several chapters to my own life. Through writing and sharing our own stories with others in the class, we were all able to move our own visions both inward and outward.

Greyhound buses were lined up, as were the thousands of Japanese, in front of the Buddhist church in Los Angeles. Climbing aboard in masses, herded like cattle, tagged with number identification instead of their names, Grandpa's self-respect was quickly deteriorating.

As they drove towards Manzanar, billowing flurries of dust and sand churned up by the wind through Owens Valley splattered on the bus like rain. They drove past the barbed-wire fence, through a gate, and into an open space. Blurred by the sand, he saw rows and rows of barracks that seemed to spread for miles across the plains. The barracks weren't quite finished: only one thickness of pine planking covered with tar paper. There were gaps between the planks of the uncovered floors where massive amounts of sand blew in all day. Each barrack was divided into six units, 16 x 20 feet with one bare light bulb hanging and a small oil stove for heat. Each person was issued an army steel cot, with two brown army blankets. The latrines were not working, and the stalls had no partitions.

Grandpa and all other Japanese placed a great importance on privacy; they demanded it for themselves and respected it in others. The packed sleeping quarters, open toilets, mess hall dining, all contributed to his loss and insult of himself. "Shigataganai," Grandpa would say. It cannot be helped!

In 1943, all prisoners 17 years and older were required to fill out a Loyalty Questionnaire. Another insult to Grandpa's already open wound. How dare they ask him such a question. He was loyal to the United States of America. Now he was no longer trusted?

After a few years, many families collapsed as integrated units. Grandpa began to change. He was no longer the leader, the strong one, the proud one, the smart one. He began to escape within. He had a few friends around the camp. One in particular brewed homemade liquor in a still behind his door. He would make his wife bring back extra portions of rice and that syrupy fruit they served in the mess hall. Together, they would make sake with the concoction and drink until they passed out.

Grandpa would wake up and stumble back to his Block 10 and scare his family and make threats. He was extremely abusive and wouldn't listen to anyone who tried to comfort him. People began to talk and that added to the shame he already felt by being interned. Four years of internment stripped him of any dignity or strength he had prior to the War. As a human being, Grandpa felt lost.

On March 15, 1946, Grandpa and his family were able to leave the camp. They took out with them approximately the same things they took in. Of course after the U.S. Government took everything they had, they had no "home" to go to, nor "business" to pick up. Grandpa had a friend with a garage and that is where he and his family of five lived. He borrowed $200 from Grandma's father and again started a produce stand. To make extra money, he and my mother would clean other people's gardens after work and on weekends.

Grandpa never resolved this humiliation from the camp days and was a very angry, hurt man. He took it out on his family, but mostly on my mother. Because she worked closely with him, she was the scapegoat. Every day after work, he

would badger her, tell her she was good for nothing, and call her "Bakayaro," a coarse word he picked up at Terminal Island which implies gross stupidity. (Chapter 2, "People: Gramps")

In the class, we began to appreciate and became more aware of not only our own unique histories, but also the histories of others and their value as part of our American heritage.

When beginning each new assignment, I never knew what I was going to write. This was somewhat frustrating at the beginning, but I soon realized that this was my writing process. I would just begin to write, and by the time I finished, I understood and figured out what it was I wanted to say. Feeling awkward with this process, I was thrilled when I came upon Joan Didion's Opaque Theory of Language, and realized she too does not know what she is trying to say until she's finished with what she's writing. Unlike Orwell, who understands before he writes, Didion writes to understand.

Autobiographical/Biographical Writing helped me to come to terms with my Japanese-American heritage. It gave me the idea to show the breadth of what I have done in my life, and gave me the perspective on roots, history, and on self. This exploration of self and exploration of my own place in family and culture has not only given me the ability to come to terms with my Japanese-American heritage, but has also given me a survival tool. Through writing, I began to recognize where my own behaviors were coming from, and knew that the cycle would have to stop with me.

> Grandpa and I never got along, and it is only recently that I have understood why. As a child I just thought he hated me, was mean to me, and I was afraid of him. My mother had her own frustrations of trying to raise a child, working, and trying to finish her college degree all at the same time. She began to act out her frustrations on me also. I was getting it from both ends. Grandpa was verbally abusive to me and my mother was physically abusive to me.
>
> Looking back into all the specifics of all of our lives, dissecting every abusive experience I can remember from Grandpa and my mother, turning inside out and upside down all the heartaches, I see that the cycle began with the internment of my family and thousands of other Japanese Americans during World War Two. I believe I can say this with certainty, knowing who my Grandfather was back in Japan and prior to World War Two, and knowing who and what he became, the turning point was the internment.
>
> This situation, however, is not only my own. I am a "Sansei," a third-generation Japanese American. There are countless Sansei who have experienced and are still experiencing the same kind of family problems that I have. The "Nisei," the second-generation Japanese Americans, were directly affected by their parents, the Isei who were interned. Many Isei became alcoholics as my grandfather did. Many committed suicide because they were not able to live with the humiliation and the shame of the camps. This all means of course that the generations that have followed and will continue to follow will be affected by that

atrocity committed against the Japanese Americans.

Although Grandpa lived for thirty-seven years after the release from internment, his life ended at Manzanar. (Chapter 2, "People: Gramps")

In closing, I have been fortunate to take part in such a self-revealing and unifying exercise. It is through this writing tool that I not only have come to terms with my heritage, but it is also the tool through which I must share my message with others. Japanese-Americans this country over must all come to terms with their own history, and understand the psychological and emotional damage the internment has had on us. Without this realization, the damaging behavior will be perpetuated.

The universal question of who we are can be realized in a profound way through writing. It calls for the ability to generalize beyond our own specific case and to challenge popular assumptions about our own heritage. For me, writing has helped me to explore questions further and make sense of the implications of my past and future. In my quest for my true voice, I have found, through language, I can now fit myself into this diverse American culture with a better understanding and sense of true belonging.

This one semester Autobiographical/Biographical Writing course was certainly better than any amount of years in therapy, and definitely cheaper!